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Oral History Interview

with

EARL WHEELER

1964

By Chester Clifton

For the John F. Kennedy Library

CLIFTON: . . . General Earle G. Wheeler, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. During the Kennedy administration, General Wheeler was first the director of the Joint Staff, later on the commanding general of the European Command, and then back to be appointed as the chief of staff of the army in which position he was serving at the time of President Kennedy's death. General Wheeler, would you start out by describing two things: first, your first acquaintance with President Kennedy and then give us a little bit about the impact of the Kennedy administration on the directorship of the Joint Staff and on the Joint Staff in the first few months of the Kennedy administration, January, February, March 1961, as far as you can recall.

WHEELER: The first time I met President Kennedy was in September of 1960 prior to his election to the presidency. At that time, of course, he had been nominated by the Democratic party as their candidate. The occasion for this meeting arose in the following manner: President (Dwight D.) Eisenhower had decided that Senator Kennedy should be given intelligence briefings on all pertinent security matters. In fact, Vice President (Richard M.) Nixon was already given additional briefings other than those he had had as a result of his official position during the Eisenhower administration. There was a great deal of discussion as to who would brief Senator Kennedy from the military side as opposed to the intelligence briefings given by Mr. Allen Dulles, the head of the CIA (Central Intelligence Agency), on the purely intelligence aspects of the United States position in the world. It was first thought that perhaps the chairman of the Joint

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WHEELER: Right. You refreshed my memory on something too that Mr. Gilpatric said having to do with the Cymington report. Namely, that once they were in office and began to take a look at how to accomplish various things they found that the law gave the secretary of defense ample authority to do things which permitted what they thought to be an improvement in the operations of the Department of Defense. I think that up until that time there had been really no close reading of the law and no recognition of the really great powers that reside in the secretary of defense. The Congress has given him a tremendous leeway. What has happened was that Mr. McNamara and Mr. Gilpatric exploited this.

CLIFTON: I think one last question on this director of the joint staff position, did you feel that President Kennedy or how would you assess his impact on the morale of the uniformed people in that first year?

WHEELER: I think that President Kennedy's greatest contribution to the morale of the uniformed people came as a result of the Cuban crisis in '62. And I'll elaborate that in our next session because there was a very definite impact at that time and it ties back to what I said earlier Ted about my belief that President Kennedy really began to recognize what he had, what an asset he had in the military as a result of the Cuban crisis in '62.

INTERRUPTION

CLIFTON: General Wheeler, when we left off we had pretty much brought us up to date to around June of the first year of President Kennedy's administration. About that time, as you recall, he did two things, he went up to Canada and planted a tree and there was a short Ottawa conference and he also then went to Europe to meet President Charles A. deGaulle and to meet Khrushchev in Vienna. I wonder if you can reminisce for a minute about the Joint Staff activities, perhaps in preparation for the deGaulle and Khrushchev meeting.

WHEELER: Actually we prepared for the Chiefs I suppose you would call them discussion items for talks that they had with the president prior to his departure for Europe. I don't recall anything particularly outstanding at that particular time. The normal problems were addressed--the question of tensions in Europe, the Berlin problem and so on. The next time of real activity came with the Berlin crisis which was in the late summer, early fall of that same year when you recall as a result of certain actions by the Soviets the administration took a hard look

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WHEELER: This is correct.

CLIFTON: And we had a balance of iron bombs and we had a balance of munitions throughout the forces.

WHEELER: This is correct.

CLIFTON: So Berlin, you might say, made the confrontation over Cuba possible in October 1962.

WHEELER: It certainly improved our capabilities and, of course, as you know, I was chief of staff of the Army in October '62. I found it possible from the strategic reserve within the United States to prepare five and one-half divisions for the invasion of Cuba. The air force and the navy were prepared to conduct, I would say, a very sizable air campaign against Cuba using conventional weapons. And they would have still had plenty of stockages left. The one thing that came out of the Cuban affair was again a shortage of airlift. You recall it was necessary to call up nineteen squadrons of air force National Guard units, reserve units, in order to provide the airlift capability for the air assault echelon going into Cuba.

Now, this is not intrinsically bad, however the aircraft with which these gentlemen were equipped was the old C-118 flying boxcars-- a two-motored aircraft which no one really likes to use for over-water transportation. The air force and the navy, I think quite properly, want to have a four engine job for over-water flights. Now of course, Cuba being only ninety miles away it wasn't as bad as it might seem. However, another limitation were the short legs of many of the older aircraft in the airlift inventory--the C-118's, the C-123's and so on. And this meant that these aircraft had to be moved into staging fields and then refueled and gotten ready for the actual assault on Cuba. It denied a certain flexibility which we would have liked to have.

CLIFTON: They actually couldn't fly troops from Fort Lewis all the way to Cuba. They had to fly in two jumps off somewhere closer and this means you're closer to where the enemy can watch you.

WHEELER: Not only that, it made a very complicated outloading problem because you had to move troops, let them sit, let the aircraft sit, and it made a very complicated movement plan. It took literally days to work out the air loading

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WHEELER: That's correct. I don't know why. . . .

CLIFTON: The Junes got mixed up.

WHEELER: The Junes got mixed up on that particular one.

BEGIN TAPE X

CLIFTON: On October 1, 1962, then General Wheeler, you were sworn in as chief of staff of the army and you were back here in Washington as a member of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. And, of course, that was the beginning of the second Cuban crisis which was already well under way. I believe you had been back here before swearing in for a week or two.

WHEELER: I came back in August, and as I recall it I was in Washington about four days to attend a hearing by the Senate Armed Services Committee of my qualifications to be chief of staff of the army--and incidentally, General Taylor appeared the same day that I did. Also at that time, I not only paid my respects on General Taylor, but he and I together called on the president. This, however, was a fifteen or twenty minute interview, purely, I think, to let me have the opportunity to thank the president for the appointment and there was no business transacted.

Really, the affair in which I became rather closely involved with President Kennedy started not with the Cuban crisis but with the integration of a Negro student into the University of Mississippi. And this affair started on the night of September 30, morning of October 1, before I had been sworn in as chief of staff of the army. The circumstances of this were rather interesting. During the week preceding my taking over as chief of staff of the army, I had been endeavoring, of course, to get caught up on various army programs, army problems, et cetera. And my predecessor General (George H.) Decker called me in one day and said that this problem of putting this Negro student, (James H.) Meredith, into "Ole Miss" was upon us, that the attorney general had asked us to be prepared to support the operation militarily. When I say militarily, I mean both logically and with troops if needed. The logistic support was to provide the marshals who were actually going to be present when Mr. (Nicholas deB.) Katzenbach took Meredith in for registration and then, as I say, to back up the marshals if they got into trouble. General Decker said to me that since he would be going out of office on October 1st that he felt that I should become well acquainted

with the operation and in effect monitor it or act for him in planning discussions with Justice or within the Defense Department.

Well, on Sunday afternoon, the thirtieth of September, things began to heat up in Mississippi. We had had no advance warning, as I recall it, that Justice really intended to put Meredith in on Monday the first of October, or perhaps I should say prior to Monday the first of October, but they did. At first when they moved him on to the campus on Sunday the thirtieth of September, everything was quiet. I was kept apprised by the army war room that things were going well, there were no problems, and so on. I was out to dinner at a friend's house, received a final call about ten, ten-thirty that all was well, and I went back to the BOQ (Bachelor Officers' Quarters) at Fort Myer and went to bed. About twelve o'clock the phone rang; it was the war room again. They said that things were a little troublesome. They said that there was a mob forming, that the decision had been made to get ready to move some troops in, in accordance with plan, and so on. But still no reason for me to come in. However, about two o'clock, I received a phone call from Secretary (Cyrus R.) Vance and he said that all hell had broken loose and asked me to join him in the war room and this I did.

And I found that things were in a pretty mess; we were really having a hell of a time. The president and the attorney general were on the phone practically constantly because the marshals were being attacked by the mob. They were running low on tear gas. They were wondering where the troops were. The troops, as a matter of fact, had been at the Memphis Naval Air Station, and there was a problem of just getting them there. There was time and space. No one knew the routes. Attempting to move these people by helicopter after dark just plain took time. There had been instructions issued to change the armament of the troops. Initially they had been directed to use only MP (military police) equipment--billy clubs, tear gas--and this was with good reason and I think justifiably changed at the last moment and the troops took their usual weapons: rifles, bayonets, et cetera.

At any rate, this was a very tumultuous night and I recall leaving the war room on the morning of October 1st about nine o'clock, going back to the BOQ at Fort Myer, bathing, shaving and putting on a uniform, and coming back to be sworn in as chief of staff of the army at 10:00 a.m. on October 1st. I may not be the best chief of staff that was ever sworn in, but I was the sleepiest. There's no question of that.

Anyway, this resulted in a series of meetings with President Kennedy because he was dissatisfied with the way the plans had operated,

and there was some question as to the responsiveness of our forces in handling this situation. I recall seeing him several times as to various aspects of this; these were usually short meetings, half an hour at the most. Usually Secretary Vance and I would go over and talk to him about this, that, and the other thing to satisfy his mind that things were going well. Then you will recall there was a rather extended period of keeping army troops on campus in order to prevent any further disorders. This went on for months, literally for months.

Then, of course, in the latter part of October, in the latter weeks of October, the Cuban crisis erupted. Again, there were several meetings with President Kennedy in which I participated with the other members of the JCS, having to do with our plans for taking care of Cuba militarily if we had to; matters discussing policy toward Cuba--what would we do, how would we do it, and so on. During the early days of the crisis, the chairman, General Taylor, attended daily--in fact, twice daily--meetings at which he was the rep of the Chiefs. These meetings were attended by the secretary of defense, Secretary (Dean) Rusk, the attorney general, and a couple of advisors at somewhat lower level. It was through this medium that we were kept aware of the various exchanges of notes with Chairman Khrushchev, the governmental reaction, and so on.

I've forgotten the date, but when the president finally made up his mind as to the course of action he was going to pursue having to do with the quarantine and so on, the Chiefs went over as a body and met with him. And we expressed our views as to the proper courses of action. The president gave us his reasoning, his motivations for the actions which he proposed to take; and thereafter, we just went to work to take them. We instituted a sizable military buildup of air, naval and ground forces; we got ourselves prepared to intervene militarily if we had to; we moved the troops into position; we marshaled a part of the shipping; we marshaled the aircraft which would have dropped two divisions in Cuba.

And then, after all of the plans were developed, I recall President Kennedy asking me to come over one day to talk to him about the army participation in a possible invasion of Cuba. It so happened that General Howze was available; he was going to be the overall commander under CINCLANT (commander-in-chief, Atlantic) for this operation. And I took Howze with me so that he would be able to answer any detailed questions, so that the president could meet him, see who the man was that was going to command the force and so on. At that time, President Kennedy--after I went over the troop list explaining from maps exactly the concept of how we were going to do it, the troop units involved--said that he was concerned that we might be

trying to do this with too few people. He placed this on the basis, one, we had to have a quick decision because of political pressures that would inevitably arise and, secondly, he was afraid that if we went in with too little that this would increase American casualties because the Cubans would be able to fight that much longer. In other words, he talked of putting enough in to overwhelm the Cubans. As a result of this, I came back and revised the army plan and increased the strength by about one additional division. So that in the final plan, we had ready to go on the army side about five and a half divisions from the strategic reserve in the United States. This included one armored division that was actually sitting at Fort Stewart, Georgia, ready to load. And they stayed there as you know for a couple of months. We only sent them home to Fort Hood, Texas, just before Christmas of that year.

As I say, there were a series of meetings that went on. For example, I happen to have here a talking paper which was prepared for General Taylor for a meeting with the president on the sixteenth of November 1962. It makes rather interesting historical reading as a matter of fact because General Taylor ended up, and this was said in the presence of all of the Chiefs: "In summary, the Joint Chiefs of Staff recommend at this juncture (a) that the IL-28s be removed from Cuba, preferably by negotiation--otherwise, by blockade followed, if need be, by military action, (b) that the removal of Soviet personnel from Cuba be made an immediate objective of negotiations with the USSR, (c) that any assurance to (Fidel) Castro be hedged by conditions protecting our obligations under the Rio Pact and linking the duration of the assurance to good behavior by Castro and the acceptance of air surveillance, (d) that in seeking a means of long-term verification and inspection which we consider to be essential, we oppose the proposals for a reciprocal UN inspection of the Caribbean and for a nuclear-free zone in Latin America." The reason I say that this is interesting historically is that reading it brings back some of the proposals that were being made around Washington as to what we would and would not accept--in fact being made outside of Washington--about nuclear-free zones, inspection, whether it was needed, how it would be done, and so on. I note that Brazil had suggested the establishment of a nuclear-free zone in Latin America.

This period of the Cuban affair, as I mentioned at the very end of our last session, I think marked a turning point in President Kennedy's attitude toward the military. You will recall that in early December, the president decided that he wanted to see what had been done as regards military preparations to handle the Cuban matter. And the Chiefs accompanied him on a very quick trip which took him to Fort Stewart, Georgia, where he saw the First Armored Division and I

think for the first time realized what a division was. Because, as you will recall Ted, the equipment stretched from miles. I don't believe he'd ever seen really what an armored division looked like, the tremendous fire power, the tremendous mass of the armored division. And you will recall it was there that for the first time that he quoted that couplet about the soldier in time of peace being neglected, et cetera, et cetera, which made a very fine impact I might add on the troops not only there but worldwide.

Later, as you will recall, we went down to Homestead Air Force Base where he saw something of the air preparations and the command and communications preparations that had been made to support the overall action. You'll also remember that we saw something of the logistic preparations, the thousands, literally thousands of tons of ammunition that had been moved in, the medical facilities that had been provided and so on. And then, of course, we went on down to Key West and saw what the navy had been doing, the air defenses that had been set up and so forth.

I felt that after his experience in the Cuban crisis, after seeing the troops, the celerity with which they moved into position, the first-class shape that the troops were in, the obvious sharpness of the commanders, everything ready to the last detail--planning and otherwise--that President Kennedy, perhaps for the first time, realized the tremendous asset, the very powerful tool that he had at his command in dealing with matters of foreign policy where military force was necessary. I also thought that I detected in later meetings with him perhaps a friendlier, a more appreciative attitude toward the military than ever before--not that I mean to say that he had ever been disagreeable or curt or ungracious, but I believe that the Bay of Pigs business had, I don't like to use the term poisoned his mind against the military, but I think that he had some very grave doubts as to the role of the military and their capability to carry out the things that he wanted done. I think that after the Cuban crisis, all of these doubts were dispelled or at least he recognized more clearly than ever before that the military were perhaps the one element that he could depend upon under any circumstance that might face this country.

CLIFTON: There were two things that became very clear to me, and I'm sure you sensed them too, subsequent to this inspection and seeing what the military had done.

One was that he asked a lot of men down there if they were personally ready to go, and their response was very business-like. There was no hip hip hooray about their attitude, but he had a reassurance from corporals, sergeants, colonels, and on up that they knew that this was a very dangerous and business-like matter, but they were perfectly

ready to go and so it if he as the commander-in-chief ordered it. Another thing--and he did get this from that trip, there's no doubt in my mind--there's another thing, I think his confidence had been shaken by the Bay of Pigs and he didn't know who was responsible for the you might say inappropriate measures of the Bay of Pigs. But having given the military rather short notice on this October '62 Cuban thing, it wasn't three or four months warning, you had probably two weeks, and the response. . .

WHEELER: Less than that, really.

CLIFTON: Less than that, really. You were thinking about it in ten days, but the actual end result was accomplished in a very short order. And he was impressed that given warning, given a hand to do what you wanted to do, and also feeling that we had provided the military with the things they needed in that past year, he certainly was a different commander-in-chief, I would say, from then on.

WHEELER: I think so. I feel that having come back from his meeting with Khrushchev in '61 rather a shaken man wondering where to turn and how to accomplish what he felt should be done, that the Cuban affair bolstered his confidence that he could deal with these very serious foreign policy matters from strength, and that he was not sealing from weakness, that he too had a lot of cards to play, that Khrushchev didn't have all the aces, that he had his fair share and perhaps more than Khrushchev. As a matter of fact he did have more than Khrushchev and I think he probably recognized this.

CLIFTON: The next meeting, I think, that we had as a formal meeting was again in December on the budget, the last wrap-up, after this visit down south, and I believe you attended that meeting.

WHEELER: Yes, this was in Palm Beach on, what was it? twenty-seventh of December I believe, 1962.

CLIFTON: Was this the meeting we took General Harkins to? I believe it was.

WHEELER: No, no. This was the year before that General Harkins had gone.

CLIFTON: Oh, General Harkins had gone out to Vietnam during '62.